



# Who Is a First-Generation Student?

## Who is a first-generation student?

That depends on whom you ask. The definition of first-generation students — a term that was coined by the Council for Opportunity in Education in 1980 — varies from campus to campus. For some colleges, it means that neither of the student's biological parents attended college. For many other institutions, the definition used to determine eligibility for some federal support programs is preferred: Students are considered first generation if their parents did not graduate from college.

Other institutions' definitions include students whose parents did not graduate from a four-year college in the United States, or students whose parents completed their degrees as nontraditional students over the age of 25.

So on one campus, a student whose parents both graduated from community college would be considered a first-generation student. On another, a student whose parents took one postsecondary class would not be.

The shifting definitions can add to the challenges for first-gen students, who may qualify for support at one institution but not when they move to another, or who meet the federal definition but not that of a nonprofit or a particular campus.

## How many first-generation students are there?

While the definition may be complicated, and a widely accepted one somewhat elusive, there's no question that first-gen students constitute a significant share of the undergraduate population. Of the more than 1.15 million students who submitted at least one application through the Common App in 2020-21, 30 percent — almost 350,000 — self-identified as first-gen. Twenty-four percent of undergraduates have parents with no postsecondary education, and 56 percent have parents who did not have a bachelor's degree, according to Naspa's Center for First-Generation Student Success. That adds up to a conservative estimate of at least four million first-gen students.



Ascendium Education Group is excited to support The Chronicle of Higher Education's initiative to prioritize student success. Over the next year, this partnership will produce special virtual events, focused reports and a new online resource center, where colleges can search and find creative solutions and useful content from The Chronicle's extensive archives of best practices.

Our support of this project promises a comprehensive look at new and innovative approaches to helping students achieve success. By collecting voices and perspectives from across higher education, The Chronicle's expert journalists can guide colleges to make actionable changes that will help close achievement gaps and fulfill the promise of socioeconomic mobility for all students.

Ascendium supports initiatives that seek to create large-scale change so more learners from low-income backgrounds can achieve their educational and career goals. We share with The Chronicle a passion and purpose to inform and empower higher education trustees, leaders, administrators and faculty members about the pressing issues facing students today. That includes shining a light on students of color and transfer students, as well as those who are the first in their family to attend college.

We believe in the power of education and training beyond high school to transform the lives of learners from low-income backgrounds. The COVID-19 health crisis has exacerbated well-documented opportunity gaps that put these learners at a disadvantage relative to their peers. This makes the solutions raised by this initiative all the more vital.

Thank you for your interest in this initiative. To learn more about Ascendium, please [subscribe to our monthly newsletter](#).

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Amy Kerwin". The signature is fluid and cursive.

**Amy Kerwin**

Vice President – Education Philanthropy  
Ascendium Education Group



## What are the characteristics of first-gen students?

[First-generation students](#) tend to be older than their peers, and almost one-third of them have dependents. They are more likely to attend classes part time or be juggling their classes with a full-time job. They are also more likely to be less well off: The median parental income for first-generation students who are dependents is [\\$41,000, compared with \\$90,000](#) for non-first-generation undergraduates.

Their identities are often intersectional. According to the [National Center for Education Statistics](#), more than half of American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, Black or African American, and Hispanic or Latino/a college graduates are first generation, whereas just over a third of Asian graduates and white graduates are. [Sixty-two](#) percent of student veterans identify as a first-generation college student.

First-gen students are also more likely to attend public, two-year colleges, a starting point that makes the bachelor's degree even more difficult to obtain — 80 percent of students enrolled in two-year colleges have plans to go on to graduate with a bachelor's degree, but only 13 percent do so within six years.

[Research](#) shows that first-gen students often confront significant obstacles in accessing higher education, succeeding after enrollment, and graduating. They lack the advantage of a parent's college experience, which can be a key resource for navigating the “hidden curriculum,” the sometimes confusing terms and practices on a campus and in a classroom. When they do graduate, the college degree doesn't always [pay off](#) as well for them: They have more trouble landing jobs than their better-connected peers and earn substantially less 10 years after receiving their degrees.

The educational opportunities for first-gen students can be transformational and

a springboard to a future career. To be the first in a family to pursue higher education takes determination, a strong work ethic, and tenacity — but too often first-gen students get to campus only to encounter challenging experiences in the classrooms and academic policies that are not student-ready.

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## Why is support for first-gen students important?

Higher ed has been increasingly focusing on first-generation students in recent decades. Eager to broaden and diversify their enrollments; to improve access, equity, and graduation rates; and to fulfill their educational and societal missions, colleges are seeking more-effective ways to help and support these students throughout their education.

But barriers remain. [About a third](#) of students whose parents didn't attend college drop out, compared with 26 percent of students whose parents attended some college and 14 percent of those whose parents have bachelor's degrees.

A college degree may be the ticket to the middle class — the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce [has predicted](#) that 70 percent of all jobs will require some education beyond high school by 2027 — but higher ed is more expensive than ever before. According to [federal data](#), nearly 74 percent of first-generation students in the class of 2015-16 borrowed money for college, compared with 64 percent of their peers, and

just over a third of first-generation students default on their loans, compared with 20 percent of their peers who have a parent with a bachelor's degree. The situation is even bleaker for low-income, first-gen students, nearly half of whom default, according to the [Center for American Progress](#).

In order for first-gen support to be more than a talking point, it is critical for colleges to find ways to help these students overcome financial, cultural, and academic obstacles in order to stay on track — and bring their unique experiences and perspectives to enrich their campuses, excel, graduate, and enter the work force.

### How are colleges supporting first-gen students?

College-preparatory courses, entrance exams, college and financial-aid applications, and application fees: The path to college involves quite a few hurdles, many of which are unseen or unclear for students whose families are unfamiliar with the journey.

To help strengthen the pipeline, colleges are creating educational partnerships with regional schools, running workshops designed specifically for students and their families about the financial-aid process, and focusing on need-based aid rather than merit-based. They are doing away with application fees, transcript fees for transfer students, and registration fees.

Colleges are also emphasizing communication and reaching out specifically to first-gen students, whether through social media, enhanced websites, virtual tours, texts from a chatbot, or even old-school postcards or phone calls.

Colleges are also providing an early introduction to campus through summer bridge programs and a structured first-year experience. To help students persist and complete their degrees, colleges emphasize focused academic support — particularly through peer tutoring, dedicated study spaces, and study groups — and conducting intrusive advising, which involves meeting with

students several times during the semester, intervening early when problems arise, and tracking their use of campus services.

Connecting to faculty members is particularly crucial for first-gen students — whether it's in the classroom, during office hours, through mentorship, or with research projects. [Studies](#) suggest that faculty-student interactions make a difference not only in graduation rates, but in the student's breadth and depth of learning. The positive effects of student-faculty interactions are especially strong for students of color and first-generation students, experts say.

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### What are colleges doing related to Covid-19?

Many are re-evaluating whether to reinstate their [standardized-testing policies after Covid](#), or whether to remain test-optional or test-blind. Experts argue that the tests disadvantage many first-gen students who can't afford expensive tutoring or to take the exams several times to improve their scores.

They are also focusing more on student well-being. For example, during the summer of 2020, the University of California at San Diego employed high-school counselors and student peer advisers to call vulnerable students every day. Team members asked specific questions: "Do you have a financial-aid package? Does it meet your need? Are you registered for classes?" If the student needed help, the team would provide direct contacts

in admissions, financial aid, housing, and other offices, so the student wasn't sent out to some void in cyberspace.

### **What strategies work for the “whole student”?**

To achieve their educational goals and to thrive while doing so, first-gen students need their institutions to build a sense of community where everyone feels they belong.

To help counter “imposter syndrome,” the [First-Generation Student Gateway](#) at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor provides a centralized space for information and community-building. At [Florida Atlantic University](#), the Office of First-Generation Student Success created a student organization, First and Proud, to foster a sense of belonging.

The Georgetown Scholars Program, which serves first-gen students, has a [calendar](#) of events designed to make first-gen students feel at home, including Project Move-In, where alumni and staff volunteers meet new GSP students who would otherwise arrive alone at airports and train and bus stations in Washington, D.C., to help them move in. Other programming includes dinners and events during campus breaks, when first-gen students often have to remain on campus, and community dinners and intramurals for the GSP community.

The program also offers “necessity funding,” or microgrants, to help cover unexpected or emergency costs, including medical co-pays, professional attire, funding for grad-school applications, and mental-health counseling.

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**“Who Is a First-Generation Student?” was produced by Chronicle Intelligence.  
Please contact [CI@chronicle.com](mailto:CI@chronicle.com) with questions or comments.**